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ENG 501 Research Proposal

General Area of Study

This research proposal aims to analyze the growing tension between professors in academia and their students from the professors' perspective. More specifically, it investigates claims of censorship from students against professors and their syllabi, as well as the emotional toll it creates to have certain pushback from students and lack of care from the administration. Censorship in primary and secondary education within America is becoming an increasing trend in the education system, and many of these attempts are backed by certain political and religious organizations (American Library Association). This trend is slowly dismantling the hegemonic structure of teacher/student within the classroom by calling on the teacher to remove material instead of pushing children to investigate different worldviews and grapple with ideas that contrast with their own. This problem of censorship, which can lead to self-censorship and the additional use of trigger warnings, has been frequently studied within the academic community (Malcolm, Bentley). Despite several academic articles researching the significance of self-censorship within the classroom, from

students and professors alike, there is a lack of empirical evidence based on the subjectivity of professor's reactions to censorship within their classrooms.

Literature Review

Prevailing research has debated students' experiences with trigger warnings in the classroom, along with the experiences of teachers and librarians who deal with book challenges in secondary education (Bentley, Sachdeva). Additionally, research has been conducted on the infringement of academic freedom by universities against faculty and the concept of "silencing" or self-censorship in the classroom based on university policies or political and religious beliefs (Swannie, Malcolm). Touching again on book challenges, Melanie Koss and Kathleen Paciga administered a questionnaire focusing on censorship against ELA teachers around the United States and broke down "five sites of resistance against censorship," which included administrative, government, and familial groups (Koss and Paciga 24). Their review of current research has focused on different aspects of censorship, ranging from book challenges to self-censorship of educators and even institutional censorship of professors.

The growing issue of censorship in education is highlighted by these debates and the multifaceted problems each article touches upon. An example is Finlay Malcolm's article, "Silencing and Freedom of Speech in

UK Higher Education” where he, “develops [a] silencing framework” (Malcolm 536) for different levels of self-censorship students may exhibit due to fear of retaliation from classmates or instructors. This framework labels the term ‘passive inhibitive silencing’ to relate to university and classroom policies that may stop students from engaging in academic debate with their peers for fear of social repercussions. A secondary focus in the debate on censorship is the emerging adoption of trigger warnings in higher education institutions and their effects on classroom learning outcomes. Michelle Bentley contributes to this debate in her article, “Trigger Warnings and the Student Experience” where she surveyed two classes dealing with difficult topics and had trigger warnings implemented in several aspects of the class. This article dealt specifically with the student's perspective on how trigger warnings are or are not affecting their education. After a near-perfect bell curve of positive and negative trigger warning experiences between the two classes, more research is called for an individualized approach between students and their reactions to the new implementations. Trigger warnings may become useful for a specific individual student but could serve as a distraction for the rest of the class. There is, again, the constant debate about censorship within primary and secondary education. Sachdeva, Koss and Paciga conducted questionnaires and interviews relating to this phenomenon, with their main points addressing the social structures educators have for one another. It is these structures of power that can strengthen an educator's response to

censorship in their classrooms; using their education and professional experiences is key to counteracting those who wish to ban literature in the classroom (Sachdeva 56).

These are all important questions and problems that researchers have pointed out in their studies, but a gap that has been consistently missed and may become more prevalent in the future is the possibility of students calling for censorship against their professors in a post-secondary institution. There have been studies conducted on the personal experiences of teachers who have witnessed censorship in their classrooms and student experiences of their fear of misspeaking about certain topics at universities. Still, no research is available on students calling for censorship against their professors and the material on their syllabi. The intended research this project plans to focus on involves the subjective experience of English professors who have been challenged in their classrooms by their students.

Research Problem and Questions

What are American English professors' experiences with a call to censorship from their students within the classroom? A 'call to censorship' refers to students asking for the removal of material from syllabi. The following questions will serve as a guideline for the questionnaire and interview portion.

- If they have experienced censorship from students, what were the actions taken and emotions experienced following the event?

- Were trigger warnings introduced if not already applied to certain material?
- Was the event escalated to administration, or was the material removed without resistance?
- Did the instructor feel a need to self-censor within the class of incident and other classes they taught?
- Did they fear end-of-term evaluation surveys and the impact of a continued contract at their institution?

The subjective experiences of professors will be analyzed for their contribution to the learning environment of the classroom and how the courses affected by censorship continued under their teaching.

Rationale for Research Problem

This lack of research in higher education is vitally important because it does two things: one, as mentioned above, censorship in the classroom shifts the power structure and traditional culture of the academic sphere more towards the student. Certain students may acknowledge the power they can now flex over instructors in regard to material on syllabi, dampening others' learning experiences and inflicting stress on the instructor. Second, this project will seek to understand and expound upon professors' emotions and experiences within their fractured classroom, therefore contributing to the foundation of the English studies field from a more personal lens.

This project is of interest to both professors and students alike and may influence how this dichotomy acts within the classroom. Traditionally, professors have taught and guided their students using specifically chosen

material to better build upon a lesson or idea they are trying to convey to their students. What happens when those professors start to worry and second-guess their choices for fear of retaliation from those they are trying to teach? Entire courses may become under scrutiny for the material that is included, leading to an erasure of valuable educational creativity and insight. Additionally, as mentioned above, censorship in secondary education is becoming an increasing phenomenon within the United States, and there is a surprising lack of empirical evidence based on the long-term effects of students growing up in these environments.

Methodology

This research will involve quantitative and qualitative elements of research practices, primarily following a sequential explanatory method of inquiry. English professors currently employed at universities and community colleges in the United States will be the major focus of this project. The first step will involve sending out questionnaires containing open and closed-format questions gauging the percentage of censorship they have experienced within the classroom. Including censorship questions, the survey will contain questions involving location, level of coursework, and course topic. Their responses will be collected and categorized according to relevance and percentage of censorship. The next section will involve a qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews for questionnaire respondents who are willing to share their

experiences of censorship in the classroom (if any of the respondents encountered censorship). The primary questions will focus on actions taken after the event occurred, the personal emotions experienced, and the specific subject that instigated the event. The instructors will be encouraged to deviate and expand upon topics they felt were not adequately handled by themselves, their students, or the administration (if involved) at the time of a call to remove material.

Since this project will involve human subjects, certain ethical considerations will be taken into account. This includes anonymity of persons involved, informed consent to record and transcribe the interview for research purposes, the task of destroying all copies of the transcriptions once the project has concluded and rewarding those involved in the case study for their time. The reward will constitute a $15 gift card to Amazon. Time commitments will play a factor, waiting for responses from the questionnaire, securing enough individuals for the case study and scheduling interviews to work around their schedules. These interviews will be conducted over Zoom in a secure location on the researcher's end to prevent unwanted attention or distractions. Six months will be the timeline for this project to include any delays in responses or scheduling conflicts for subjects involved. Three months are devoted to the questionnaire, with the remaining three devoted to scheduling, interviewing, and transcribing.

Potential outcomes and limitations to the research

Potential outcomes may contribute to the broader discussion of censorship within the classroom and reveal a missing gap in evidence of students growing up under censorship and constantly having their teachers reprimanded. Although this research will focus on English professors, the research may uncover a link between student learning under censorship in primary education and censorship in post-secondary education. Additionally, the research could provide empirical evidence of professors' subjective experiences with censorship in the classroom. This perspective of censorship has yet to be analyzed. It could be an excellent insight into how those in the academic community adjust to the new generation and the values they bring to the classroom. Those values can be analyzed in the debate against the more traditional culture of the academic sphere, such as using trigger warnings in the classroom or the continued debate on gender and sexuality in the sociopolitical framework of today’s climate.

The main limitations will be the sample size in both the questionnaire and interview aspects of the project. This project is meant to fulfill preliminary empirical research on censorship in university classrooms along with the experiences of professors who taught those courses, but it will lack the scope required to comment on any fundamental or generalized issues of censorship across academia. Nonetheless, the importance of this research, despite its limitations in scope, can reveal specific consequences of a

reversal of roles in the professor/student relationship. This changing dichotomy between teacher and student could have future political implications, such as a rise of and debate against authoritarian figures. Those who shun education, critical thinking, and its leaders are more likely to fall prey to corruptible figures who will not be held accountable for their crimes or their withheld promises of a better future. There is, in addition, the debate against these authoritarian figures. Still, when the structures of checks and balances have fallen due to the negligence of those against education, there will be little struggle for those who want to cement their power over others at the top.

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